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Evil Collectives

1. Introduction

Recent philosophical writing on evil has had much to say about what, if anything, warrants terming an individual human agent ‘evil’ (or, which I shall assume amounts to the same thing, ascribing to him an evil character). But there has been relatively little attention paid to whether collective groups of various kinds can meaningfully be called ‘evil’ (or assigned an evil character or nature). This might be thought surprising when we consider that a great many of the worst instances of human inhumanity are the work of agents who self-identify with groups of one sort or another, and who conceive themselves to be acting on their behalf and in their name. Notoriously, nation states, ethnic and tribal groups, religious sects, political parties and factions, cults and corporations can be fountainheads of grossly cruel, oppressive or exploitative behaviour. In turn, much of their bad work is carried out by subordinate or subservient groups which serve as secondary foci of individual identification, such as armies, militias, police and security forces and terrorist cells. If we understand the noun ‘evil’ to mean, roughly, serious unjustified harm intentionally and culpably inflicted on sentient beings (adapted from Kekes 1999: 1), then it is patent that collectives of different kinds are causally responsible for very many evils in the world, affecting animals as well as human beings. 1

The actual production of evil in this sense is not required to justify terming an individual or a collective body ‘evil’, for attempts to do evil sometimes fail or are prevented; but a terrorist group which attempts unsuccessfully to carry out a public outrage may be deemed no less evil than another, more efficient or luckier, which succeeds. Here the quality of will that is demonstrated is more significant than the effects achieved. 2 However, to say that a collective body *does* evil (or at least tries to do it) does not entitle us without further ado to describe that body as *being* evil, anymore than we may conclude from the fact that an individual agent performs or attempts some extremely harmful act that he or she is of deplorable character or wickedly motivated. Some evil deeds are out-of-character deeds, performed in anger or passion and untypical of the agent’s normal behaviour; to condemn him or her as ‘evil’ on the basis of a single bad act might not always therefore be reasonable or just. An evil agent is one ‘who

repeatedly perpetrates, or attempts to perpetrate, evil acts' (Formosa 2008: 233); for such an agent deliberately harming or trying to harm others is habitual rather than exceptional. Evil collectives, too, can be expected to do (or attempt to do) evil frequently rather than rarely.

More puzzlingly for our moral assessments, some of the worst deeds done by human beings have been done with the best of intentions, or at least with what the agent conceived to be such. The conscientious service of God (or the gods), king, country or tribe has been richly productive of harmful action throughout history. Situational pressures can also give rise to terrible acts by people who in more ordinary circumstances would hesitate before killing a fly. And Adam Morton suggests that 'far more evils are performed by perfectly normal people out of confusion or desperation or obsession than by violent individuals or sociopaths' (Morton 2004: 53-4). Although we would like to think of ourselves as the rational, self-determining beings envisaged by Kant, capable of giving ourselves the moral law and abiding by it, too often the mirror of experience reveals us to be thoughtless, timid, easily-led creatures of indifferent honesty. As Voltaire remarked, 'the dough from which we are kneaded often gives rise to murder, as it does to stupidity, calumny, vanity, and persecution' (Voltaire 2011: 141).

There is no good reason to suppose that human beings operating collectively are in general any better than individuals at resisting the situational pressures or the mental and moral weaknesses which issue in evil acts. Indeed, the social dynamics of collectives can make it still easier for them than for individuals to lose control of the moral brakes. The diffusion of responsibility within many collectives can generate an operational ethos which forwards the goals which form their *raison d'être* without requiring too nice a scrutiny of ways and means. But, just like individuals, some collectives may do evil occasionally rather than regularly, and they may be heavily susceptible to the force of circumstances. Hence there is once again a need for caution in inferring from the doing of evil acts to the possession of an underlying evil constitution or character.

Nevertheless there is no shortage of instances of collective bodies which many people would have little hesitation in calling 'evil'. A (very) short list of some of the more popular examples would include the German National Socialist Party, Stalin's secret police establishment in its successive incarnations, Al Qaeda, the Ku Klux Klan, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Thuggi sect of stranglers in India. More controversially, President Ronald Reagan referred to the 'evil

empire' created by the Soviet Union and President George W. Bush denounced the 'axis of evil' he alleged to link Iran, Iraq and North Korea (or at any rate their governments). The blatant politicking involved in some condemnations of certain countries, governments, regimes, factions, organisations or sects as 'evil' – often then used to justify their violent destruction or suppression – has persuaded many that talk of 'evil' would be best eliminated from political discourse. Richard Bernstein warns against the Manichean world-vision that relies on making 'simple binary oppositions of Good and Evil' (Bernstein 2005: 50), while Phillip Cole objects that damning those we dislike as 'evil' '*obstructs* our understanding, blocks our way, brings us to a halt' (Cole 2006: 236). These are significant objections, and it is undeniable that the term 'evil' is too readily resorted to by those (especially but not only politicians) who are not merely uninterested in comprehending the alien or the other, but for self-interested reasons keen that no one else should do so either. But the fact that a word is often abused is not by itself sufficient to justify discarding it. The question is at least worth asking whether there is theoretical advantage to be gained from classifying some collectives as 'evil'. In the following pages I shall argue that there is such advantage, and that it is indicative neither of prejudice nor muddle to classify some collectives this way.

2. *Collectives and their kinds*

Collectives take a wide range of forms, and a large and lively philosophical literature has focused in recent years on two distinct but complementary sets of questions: first, *descriptive* questions about the nature, internal structure and functional modes of different kinds of group; and second, *normative* questions about the moral and legal responsibility and accountability of groups and their constituent members. It would not be practicable, even if it were desirable, to survey here the range of answers that writers have given to these questions. But it is useful to draw on this literature for some starting-points, particularly in regard to the typology of groups and the conditions under which groups as wholes (as distinct from their individual members) may be held morally responsible.

A first rough-cut distinction between collectives favoured by many writers is that between what Peter French has called 'aggregates' and 'conglomerates' (French 1984: 5, 13). The former

are mere unstructured collections or gatherings of people, such as a crowd of holiday-makers, the audience at a concert, the spectators at a soccer game (where they are not part of an organised supporters' club), or people gathered at the site of an accident. While some common individual interest or purpose may have drawn them together (such as a desire to hear the concert), they have not assembled to pursue some project *as* a group, and no purpose(s) can be assigned to the group as a whole which cannot be assigned to its members separately. (One might even want to place the term 'members' here within scare-quotes to reflect their lack of a concerted plan or purpose.) A 'conglomerate' collective, in contrast, is one that possesses some form of organisation or structure appropriate to achieving certain goals or purposes that belong to the group as a whole rather than to its members *qua* individuals. While the spectators at a soccer game may be a mere unorganised crowd, the players on the field are members of intricately structured teams assembled to serve the end of winning the game. It is of course true that the players are also individually committed to winning the game, but they are not committed to winning it individually but only as members of the team. Winning the game is the *joint purpose* of the team players. In Michael Bratman's phrase, they exhibit *shared cooperative activity* (Bratman 1992).

Not all collectives can be neatly categorised as either aggregates or conglomerates. Some, such as nations, ethnic groups or socio-economic classes, have characteristics which could place them in either camp. An ethnic group might be considered to be the aggregate of individuals who happen to have been born with a specific genetic identity; but ethnic groups sometimes display a degree of organisation and concerted purpose in safeguarding or advancing the interests of their members which constitutes them a form of conglomerate. Conglomeration comes in degrees depending upon the level of internal organisation devised (or 'evolved', where something more like an invisible hand is at work) in order to realise the shared purposes of the group. Tightly-organised conglomerates such as commercial companies and corporations, religious orders, trade unions and certain professional bodies typically have a hierarchical structure and well-defined policy- and decision-making procedures, codes of conduct or rules of operation. (French calls these 'Corporate Internal Decision' (CID) structures (French 1979: 212).) Other conglomerates exhibit these features in a more rudimentary or partial form, but to count as a conglomerate at all a group needs to possess them in at least a minimal degree. Plausibly, too, there needs to be some sense among the constituent individuals of their

identification with the group, or at least a willingness to cooperate in its enterprises (though this may sometimes be grudging, as in the case of a bored or lazy employee of a commercial company). Where, for example, the residents of a particular locality see themselves as having nothing in common besides mere location, they are no more than an aggregate of individuals and families; but if they start to regard themselves as neighbours, form a residents' group and take an active pride in their common environment, they are beginning to function as a (loose) conglomerate. Necessity is often the mother of invention when an initially random assemblage of individuals who find their shared interests under threat come together for purposes of joint protection. So in countries in which large numbers of people regularly commute to work by train, it is common for travellers to band together to form rail users' associations, which campaign and lobby for 'fair fares' and the improvement of services. While rail users as a whole are an aggregate rather than a conglomerate, a rail users' association can be considered as a conglomerate which works on behalf of that aggregate or some portion of it.

A conglomerate such as a rail users' association exists to serve the interests of a certain constituency of individuals but conglomerates can also have purposes of their own which provide the reasons for individuals to join or support them. A British football club offers a simple example. The players, management, fans and funders of a club like Manchester United are concerned to promote the interests of the team itself, rather than their private interests (ideally at least).³ And though it is true that football clubs only exist because people enjoy 'the beautiful game', their pleasure comes principally from seeing their team compete successfully against other teams. This objective is not only contingently but logically impossible for any individual; only a team can beat another team. People can feel loyalty towards collective organisations for many different reasons, and they may take pleasure in their own loyalty. But to reap this pleasure they first have to care about the collective and its objectives. Sometimes the collective's own interests are the ultimate focus of their members' loyalty, while in others the collective is valued for its role in serving the ends of some more encompassing collective. Thus the aiders and abettors of Al Qaeda doubtless view that organisation's success less as an end in itself than as an effective means of promoting a radical Islamic agenda.

Methodological individualists maintain that social processes, including the acts and operations of collectives, are fully analysable in terms of individual intentions and behaviour. Because

collectives are made up of individuals, this claim has a specious attraction: without the presence of individuals acting deliberately, there would *be* no groups or group activity. But it is far from obviously true if it is construed to imply that, for example, the purposeful activity of Manchester United can be reductively analysed, without remainder, by reference to the purposes and activities of individuals. Such an analysis misses the point that, in the words of Émile Durkheim, when individuals constitute a ‘society’, ‘the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics’ (Durkheim 1964: 103). Through the ‘mingling and fusing’ of individual effort, a new social organism emerges with its own distinctive goals and modes of functioning (ibid.). The social fact which is Manchester United Football Club supervenes on the activities of its constituent members and develops certain features which are not any individuals’. Winning the Football Association Cup is a logically appropriate aim only for the Club and not for the individual members or players, though they all wish for their Club to win and work towards that end. Even a conglomerate like a rail users’ group, which exists solely to promote the interests of individuals, may have features or modes of operation which resist an individualist analysis; e.g. it may *browbeat* the railway companies into giving passengers a better deal, or *coordinate* a fare-paying passengers’ payment strike. Only collectives which are pure aggregates are susceptible to analysis in wholly individualist terms.

The inadequacy of methodological individualism as a reductive principle applicable to all and any collectives has prompted many writers to explore the modes in which collective responsibility, causal, moral and legal, can be assigned to groups. Again, there is no space here to pursue the details of this extensive literature. But one theme which has loomed large in recent writing is importantly relevant to the present discussion. It is commonly, and plausibly, maintained that the possibility of collective *actions* presupposes that of collective *intentions*, since actions are done by agents, and to be an agent (as distinct from a producer of random behaviour) calls for a capacity to form purposes. Hence several philosophers have explored the conditions under which collectives can be ascribed shared intentions which transcend the purposes of their individual members (see, e.g., Feinberg 1968, French 1979, 1984 and 2010, Tuomela 1989, Gilbert 1989 and 2006, Bratman 1992, May 1992, Velleman 1997, Corlett 2001, Sadler 2006, Arnold 2006).

To assign intentions to collectives does not imply ascribing to them collective minds (on which I shall say more in the next section). Denis Arnold has suggested that we can look on intentions as, quite simply, ‘commitments to future action’ which do not require ‘conscious biological beings’ as their hosts (Arnold 2006: 284). One might, however, wonder whether it is any less problematic to attribute *commitments* to non-conscious subjects than intentions. But we do not need to regard collectives as unconscious, even while conceding that there are no collective minds. The intentions of conglomerate collectives are best regarded as a complex function of those of their members (who obviously do have minds), but the function is not a simple reductive one, as methodological individualists would have it. Rather, the adoption or evolution of Corporate Internal Decision structures supports the development and pursuit of intentions which are impossible or inappropriate for individuals in isolation. That collectives can be ascribed such intentions is consistent with common modes of speech, as when we say that the Gigantic Oil Company means to drive its rivals out of business, or that the Spanish Inquisition sought to extirpate heresy in Spanish lands, or that Oxfam aims to save the people of X from starvation. Such organisations have appropriate CID structures to enable them to engage in cooperative activity with the collective equivalent of single-mindedness. Where these are absent, as in the case of a disorganised mob of people who go on a spree of looting and vandalism, no collective intention can normally be assigned, though an internal dynamic can sometimes develop that leads individuals to behave in ways they would not have done if acting alone. As Raimo Tuomela puts it, such individuals are acting as members of a group but not *for* the group (Tuomela 1989: 476).

Just as individual agents can be held morally responsible for the acts they intentionally perform, so too can collectives, since they can have intentions that are irreducible to those of (some or all) of their constituent members. And plainly those collective intentions can be morally good, bad or indifferent. Whether they can also ever be classed as *evil* is the point of present concern. Because collective intentions are ascribed to conglomerates rather than to aggregates, the former rather than the latter will be the main focus of attention. But it should be noted that evil is occasionally associated with aggregates. An angry crowd baying for the blood of some innocent person might tempt an appalled observer to apply the term ‘evil’, or describe the mob as being ‘in an evil mood’. This description might seem warranted precisely by the fact that the crowd *intended* to catch and lynch the object of their wrath. But here a methodological

individualist analysis of the group intention is admissible: the crowd is an assemblage of people possessed of the same *individual* intention of causing serious harm to the target. One might therefore say that the crowd is evil because the people composing it are evil (though this judgement may be too harsh if such behaviour on their part is rare rather than regular). But the question I want to concentrate on is whether conglomerates which resist a methodological individualist analysis can ever properly be said to be evil.

As with individuals, it would be rash or unreasonable to judge a collective to be evil on the basis of its manifesting evil intentions only on isolated occasions. Collectives, like individuals, can sometimes act ‘out of character’. Even where an evil intention *is* characteristic of an individual or collective, he or it might still not deserve to be dismissed as evil if there are also some compensating good qualities; here, the moral character might better be described as ‘mixed’. Only where a collective is predominantly focused on doing evil and has no or very few saving graces would an unqualified description as ‘evil’ be apt.

There is also something deeply unsatisfactory about a public agency that knowingly causes or permits serious unmerited harm to occur, not with any intention that it should but from the negligence or laziness of its personnel, or sheer organisational inertia. An organisation that could perform its functions and achieve its ends without causing harm but which takes no trouble to do so, or which slothfully fails to obviate serious harm when it could, is highly reprehensible. Although it would not be doing evil according to our working definition, since it lacks the conscious intention to cause harm, it might be said to do evil of a ‘banal kind’, where this is marked by indifference or thoughtlessness rather than ill-will. (Indeed, the harm for which it is responsible may be all the greater owing to the chronic absence of any restraining moral reflection.) Multi-person organisations might seem to have less excuse than individuals for allowing themselves to sink into such moral somnolence, since many consciences would seem better than one; yet an organisation’s CID structures may effectively shut down internal discussion, leaving it to the efforts of whistle-blowers to shake it out of its moral complacency. Such a morally careless collective that does great harm might be described as being ‘evil in the banal mode’, but it would not count as ‘evil’ in the more robust sense which is the main concern of this essay.

3. *Do collectives have the right psychology to be evil?*

Just as an individual may have and carry out an intention to inflict what she recognises as serious unjustified harm on other sentient beings, so too may a collective body. The Gigantic Oil Company may deliberately adopt a no-holds-barred strategy for putting its rivals out of business, including the use of intimidation, blackmail, sabotage and other Mafia-style tactics against anyone who stands in its way. To act like this is to do evil, and to do it intentionally, rather than accidentally, inadvertently or through negligence. It was noted earlier that there is no automatic inference from 'X does evil' to 'X is evil'. Yet there seems little that can be said in favour of the Gigantic Oil Company, whose aggressive and self-serving plans fly wholly in the face of ordinary morality. Even apologists for capitalist enterprise who hold that the sole social responsibility of commercial companies is to increase their profits would, one hopes, concede that there are *some* minimal moral side-constraints that companies must observe. It might be suggested that it is the directors of Gigantic Oil who deserve to be labelled 'evil', rather than the company as a whole. But a collective intention does not have to be one arrived at democratically. An organisation is liable to fracture or fail if senior management become seriously at loggerheads with one another or their subordinates; but, absent such destructive disagreements, an organisation can have collective intentions which are set by some sub-set of its members according to its constitutive rules, and which are not to be confused with any individual intentions they might have (e.g. that of lining their own pockets).

Vices, like virtues, can be developed by habitual practice of the relevant kinds of act. The directors of Gigantic Oil may have become purblind in regard to moral reasons, being caught up in a pernicious and corrupting commercial culture which denigrates morality as 'bad for business'. They may believe that ordinary standards are suspended in the dog-eat-dog world of the international oil trade, where soft treatment of one's rivals is neither prudent nor expected, and where not 'Do as you would be done by' but 'Do as you would expect to be done by' is the operative precept. Such attitudes certainly cannot render their actions blameless. But would the presence of such attitudes among the executives and managers of the Gigantic Oil Company ground a defence against the charge that the Company was an evil organisation (or that it was evil only in the banal mode)? Hardly, for its unwarranted harsh treatment of its rivals is not inadvertent or negligent but perfectly deliberate. As members of civil society, the personnel of

Gigantic Oil have been exposed since childhood to its moral standards, and can fairly be expected to adhere to them. They have no right, and should *know* they have no right, to shed their morals along with their hats and coats as soon as they pass through the Company's portals. If the Company's ethos is powerful enough to induce such moral insouciance in its personnel, this only strengthens the impression of it as an evil organisation. Whether moral thoughts, dispositions and inhibitions are merely absent or positively discouraged, the Gigantic Oil Company is the collective analogue of the individual agent who intentionally does great harm knowing it to be harm and uninhibited by that knowledge.

There is, though, one variety of evil nature that it is very doubtful whether collectives, as distinct from individuals, can possess. This is the kind that is attributed to 'moral monsters' whose motivation is pure malice or malevolence, and who delight in causing or contemplating the suffering of others. Hume provides the classic sketch of an individual of this type:

A creature, absolutely malicious and spiteful, were there any such in nature, must be worse than indifferent to the images of vice and virtue. All his sentiments must be inverted, and directly opposite to those which prevail in the human species. Whatever contributes to the good of mankind, as it crosses the constant bent of his wishes and desires, must produce uneasiness and disapprobation; and on the contrary, whatever is the source of disorder and misery in society, must, for the same reason, be regarded with pleasure and complacency (Hume 1902: 226).

Hume's characterisation of the evil character has been echoed by a number of recent writers. Hillel Steiner construes the psychology of evil-doers in terms of the perverse satisfaction they feel when things go badly for other people (Steiner 2002: 189), while Colin McGinn proposes that the 'basic idea' of the evil person is one of a character that derives pleasure from others' pain and pain from others' pleasure (in contrast to the virtuous person, who takes pleasure in their pleasure and pain in their pain (McGinn 1997: 62)). Daniel Haybron describes the evil person as being 'thoroughly or consistently' vicious and with no, or very few, redeeming qualities (Haybron 2002: 63). An evil being of this kind is not merely unmoved by the sight of others sentient beings' pain, distress or misfortune, or prepared to do terrible things to them in

furtherance of his own ends: he is positively motivated to do them harm for the sake of the pleasure it gives him. McGinn suggests that such malevolence may in some people's case be a psychologically primitive disposition, hard-wired into them just as altruism appears to be in others (McGinn 1997: 82-4). In practice, active malevolence is more often encountered in a somewhat less 'pure' form than this. Usually the malevolent person's targets are not just randomly chosen but are specific people or groups for whom he 'has it in'. These may be people against whom he holds a grudge or whom he sees as enemies, aggressors or rivals, or as objects of fear or envy, or simply as 'different', 'alien' or for some particular reason (e.g. their skin colour, values, way of life or religious affiliation) odious. Hating them for what they are, he delights in what causes them physical or mental pain and feels sorry when they flourish.

At first sight, it is not only individuals who can be ascribed such malevolent dispositions. For there is no shortage of examples of collectives that appear to be motivated wholly or partly by attitudes of hatred for specific others. It would be odd to deny that the German National Socialist Party exhibited an intense hatred of Jews, gypsies and homosexuals, or the Ku Klux Klan a detestation of people of black skin. Stories abound of Nazis who delighted in tormenting and killing Jews and of Klan members who relished the persecution and humiliation of blacks. If individual agents who act in such ways can be said to display evil character, then why not too those collectives which manifest similarly monstrous behaviour?

An organisation such as the Ku Klux Klan is evidently composed of hate-filled and malevolent individuals. It may seem to follow that the Klan itself can be described as 'hate-filled' and 'malevolent'. And in one sense it is true that the KKK is hate-filled and malevolent, since it is composed of members who are. But to identify the hatred and malevolence of the Klan with the sum of those attitudes on the part of its membership, though appealing to methodological individualists, leaves the more interesting question untouched of whether the organisation can be ascribed hatred and malevolence in a further *non-reductive* sense. Can the KKK or the Nazi Party *as such* be said to hate Jews or blacks or to entertain malevolent attitudes towards them? To this, I think the answer is no. On Hume's and McGinn's analysis of the evil character, which spotlights the *pleasure* taken in the misfortune of others and the *pain* in their flourishing, the capacity to feel pleasure and pain is a necessary prerequisite of having such a character. So if malevolence is understood as being, or involving, a disposition to take pleasure and pain in

certain objects, only a genuine subject of positive and negative hedonic states can be malevolent.

4. But a collective such as the Nazi Party, the KKK or Al Qaeda is not a genuine subject of hedonic states. Such collectives lack the unitary consciousness that is required to be a subject of such states. The members of these organisations may enjoy seeing their enemies suffer but the collectives themselves are not such psychological subjects. A collective can be committed to pursuing hostile actions towards its enemies or rivals but it cannot smack its lips in satisfaction at seeing them suffer. Because there is no such thing as a collective or group mind, there can be no collectives that are malevolent in the sense described.

Some theorists, to be sure, have toyed with the idea that collective bodies of people can develop a group mind. Intrigued by the propensity of social organisations to generate dynamic principles which were unpredictable on the basis of the behavioural dispositions of their members, Durkheim hypothesised that ‘Individual minds, forming groups by mingling and fusing, give birth to a being, psychological if you will, but constituting a psychic individuality of a new sort’. This was not a ‘separate personal existence’ existing alongside the personal existences of the constituent members; although Durkheim’s conception is notoriously under-described, he appears to have envisaged a kind of consciousness which supervenes on the operations of individual minds. Unsurprisingly, such theories of a collective consciousness have generally been dismissed as baroque and unintelligible by recent philosophy. Brook Jenkins Sadler remarks that while it might be attractive to those of ‘a mystical bent’, ‘the notion of a shared mind is nonetheless philosophically opaque or mysterious’ (Sadler 2006: 115). Edmund Wall likewise rejects the idea that corporations possess a corporate mind, on the ground that ‘a corporation lacks cognitive ability to follow reasons. ... In the absence of beliefs and desires, reasons and actions cannot be attributed to an entity’ (Wall 2000: 189). If group minds existed, it is obscure where they would be located. Would a collective mind be spread amongst the individual members, each one containing or sustaining some part of it? In that case, would it change its identity as the membership changed? Or would it have a ghostly existence in the space between individuals, as separate Cartesian *res cogitans*? And how could it be determined what it thought or felt? If we questioned those members of the collective who claimed to speak on its behalf, how could we be sure that we were accessing the thoughts or sentiments of the collective rather than their own?

It is a reasonable working hypothesis that there are no group minds. But while collectives, lacking collective consciousness, cannot plausibly be ascribed the kind of hedonic states that are necessary for the attribution of evil-as-malevolence, that does not mean that they cannot be evil. For if collectives can be ascribed *evil intentions*, then a strong case can still be made for saying that they can *be* evil as well as *do* evil. I argued in Section 2 that it is both intelligible and plausible to attribute intentions to conglomerate collectives. Where a collective displays through its actions the intention to cause serious, culpable undeserved harm, regularly and as a matter of course, then it deserves to be described as ‘evil’. In the next section, I say more about the nature of such collective intentions.

4. *Evil collective intentions*

Consider the following statements of intention:

- (1) ‘We intend to dig the garden together.’
- (2) ‘We intend to dance a tango together.’
- (3) ‘Manchester United means to win the Football Association Cup this season.’

These statements have in common that for any of the announced intentions to be carried out requires a plurality of people to pool their individual efforts and act in concert with one another. Each of the gardeners, tango-dancers or members of Manchester United Football Club can be ascribed what Christopher Kutz has called a ‘participatory intention’ to act in a way that makes a contribution to a collective enterprise (Kutz 2000). But there are differences between the examples. (1) and (2) are both expressions of shared intentions, though of logically distinct sorts, since the sharing of the intention is contingent in the former case and necessary in the latter. If two people plan to dig the garden together but one of them later pulls out, the remaining person can still intend and act on his intention to dig the garden (though not to dig it *together* with his friend). Where activity is contingently cooperative, each participant can play his part without the other’s doing so, though not always with equal ease or efficiency (as when one person pedals a bicycle made for two). But since it takes two to tango, the default of one partner leaves the remaining partner not only unable to dance the tango but to intend to dance it. Sustaining an individual participatory intention of this kind requires that all the relevant partners

sustain it too: their cooperation is essential to the activity's taking place. A pair of tandem-riders or a pair of tango dancers are, in effect, limiting cases of collectives, having only two members; they might be termed 'micro-collectives'.

Michael Bratman's influential analysis of such 'shared cooperative activity (SCA)' pinpoints three distinctive features. (Bratman focuses on two-person cases such as dancing the tango or riding a tandem but takes his analysis to apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to many-person cooperative activities too). First, each partner or participant is *mutually responsive* to the intentions and actions of the other, knowing the other to be similarly responsive to her own; second, each is *committed to the joint activity* and acts in a way appropriate to that commitment; third, each agent shows a *commitment to mutual support*, being prepared to help the other to perform his or her role in the joint activity (Bratman 1992: 328). Bratman notes that participants, while committed to the joint activity, may sometimes have different personal 'subplans': his example is of two people who intend to paint a house together, where one is particularly keen to use an inexpensive paint while the other wishes to buy the paint from a particular store. Provided that each is willing to go along with the other's subplan(s) (what Bratman terms the 'meshing' of subplans), the presence of different subplans is quite compatible with the maintenance of SCA (Bratman 1992: 332). 5

Statement (3) refers to a normal (as distinct from a micro-) collective body's intending something, though it makes implicit reference to the intentions of individuals. Manchester United could not intend to win the FA Cup if there were no appropriate participatory intentions on the part of the managers, trainers, players and supporters of the Club to promote that end. But no member of Manchester United could intelligibly state his participatory intention in the form 'I'm going to win the FA Cup with you, and you, and you.' The intention of Manchester United to win the Cup is a collective one, its ontological basis being the intentions of the Club members to engage in cooperative activity that displays the three core features identified by Bratman. Discharging different roles, all are committed to achieving the same end, mutually responsive to the intentions and action of the others, and prepared to support one another's individual contribution to the joint enterprise. And as in many large organisations, semi-independent shared cooperative activity by various sub-groups contributes to the Club's attainment of its

objectives, in this case the most important of these subserving SCAs being the coordinated actions of the players on the field. 6

Consider now four further statements expressive of intentions:

- (4) 'We mean to torture this prisoner together.'
- (5) 'We mean to form a gang to terrorise the neighbourhood.'
- (6) 'The Ku Klux Klan aims to reverse the process of black emancipation.'
- (7) 'The Ku Klux Klan intends to make life hard for the new black mayor of X.'

Three of these new statements pair up with statements (1) to (3). Statement (4) resembles (1) in expressing an intention which happens to be shared but logically could be retained by an individual agent were prospective partners to drop out. Statement (5) is analogous to (2) (except that gangs normally consist of more than two people), in that while each prospective gang member intends to form a gang with others, none could retain that intention if the others did not too, since it takes more than one person to constitute a gang; gangs are not merely contingently but essentially cooperative, and some have elaborate CID structures. Once a gang is formed, it will form its own collective intentions. Statement (6), which is akin to (3), expresses this kind of intention. An individual member of the Ku Klux Klan does not intend to reverse the process of black emancipation with Jim, and Joe, and Jack, and ..., but rather to contribute his personal efforts to an organisation which pursues that objective. An organisation like the KKK can be highly effective in advancing its evil agenda precisely because of its tightly-organised cooperative structure. Klan members contribute their individual efforts to the organisation's objectives and mutually assist one another to discharge their responsibilities.

Statement (7) expresses a collective intention but one which, unlike that expressed by (6), would also be possible for an individual. Reversing the process of black emancipation is not something that an individual could sensibly intend to do by himself but he could intelligibly mean to make life hard for the new black mayor. Individual members of the Klan might independently share, and act on, the same intention, but once they pool their efforts and act cooperatively they begin to operate as a small collective within the larger. There will doubtless be more elaborate modes of harassment which call for the ampler operational resources of the KKK – its financial, political and media resources, and its capacity to frighten and intimidate by

its very name. When these are brought into play, the evil intention to make life hard for the new black mayor can be attributed to the KKK itself.

If it be granted that the disposition to form and pursue evil intentions justifies the description of their possessor as ‘evil’, then it follows that there are such things as evil collectives, where the intentions that typify the collective are evil. 7 Both propositions (6) and (7) express evil collective intentions. Although collectives cannot be ascribed minds of their own or (*a fortiori*) minds that delight in the suffering of others, collective intentions might by extension be said to be motivated by hatred or malice when hatred and malice inspire the participatory intentions of the members. In this respect the members of the KKK differ from the executives and employees of the Gigantic Oil Company, who also plan to do considerable culpable and unmerited harm to the Company’s rivals but from commercial rather than malicious motives. Yet this scarcely protects the Gigantic Oil Company against the charge of *being*, as well as *doing*, evil. For even though the harm its agents do is not malicious, its intentions are tempered by no moral constraints or concern about the harm it does. Such profound inattention to the reasons favouring humane courses has indeed been argued by Eve Garrard to be the most distinctive mark of an evil nature (Garrard 1998). Although the absence of malicious intentions may make it marginally less sinister than the KKK, its intention to destroy its rivals by hook or by crook is quite sufficient to justify the label ‘evil collective’.

5. *Wrong values, false beliefs: how collectives may be corrupt and corrupting*

Is it reasonable to require that, before a collective intention may be judged evil, there must be a clear recognition within the collective that what is intended to be done is evil? To this, I think, the answer should be ‘No’; though this is compatible with allowing that ignorance or underestimation of the wrongfulness of what is done may sometimes provide some mitigation of the offence, provided that the ignorance or misjudgement is not itself culpable. This may seem precisely the place to draw the distinction between *doing* evil and *being* evil. When agents, individually or collectively, do terrible things which they believe required by God’s command, or for the sake of national security, or because the victims of their harshness are wicked folk who deserve punishment, condemning them as ‘evil’ may appear to pay too scant regard to their

upright, if misapplied, motives; a fairer description of their state might be ‘tragically mistaken’. Yet these epithets do not really exclude each other. Some ignorance and false belief may be considered both corrupt and corrupting. To refrain from describing the Ku Klux Klan, the Nazi Party, the Spanish Inquisition or Al Qaeda as ‘evil’ because the harmful objectives they pursued were internally sanctioned as just and necessary (assuming that they were) is taking generosity too far. For evident too is the sheer callousness which characterises such organisations, and their institutionalised blindness. Only believe that another is your enemy and there is scant incentive to try to empathise with him; and where there is no empathy, there is nothing to encourage you to get to know him better. False belief and a deficit of empathy thus mutually reinforce each other, in a highly toxic mix.

Compare the organisations just mentioned with two other examples of organisations that intentionally cause great harm yet whose members believe they are doing right. The first is an order of missionaries which conducts a robust campaign of Christian conversion amongst what it sees as a benighted pagan community, in the process destroying all that made their culture distinctive. The order’s onslaught on the spiritual and material heritage of the targeted souls disconnects them from their past, undermines their social identity and leaves them open to political and economic exploitation in the new world into which they are thrust; as a lesser but non-negligible effect, it also impoverishes humanity in general by reducing cultural diversity. Yet suppose that the order achieves its results by means of charismatic preaching, impressive ceremonial and rewarding conformity, and rejects the strong-arm techniques of violence, intimidation or enslavement practised by some others. Despite the fact that the order causes serious undeserved harm, to call it ‘evil’ sounds too severe. For its collective intention to convert the community and destroy its traditional heritage, if deplorable by liberal standards, stems from a well-meaning desire to benefit the people concerned.

Next, consider a national government which believes (on the basis of apparently sound intelligence) that another country is about to launch an unprovoked military assault on the homeland. Considering that its first duty is to protect its own citizens, the government forms the collective intention to mount a pre-emptive strike against the perceived enemy. In carrying out this intention, it causes many casualties and massive damage in the latter’s territory. However, it later transpires that the ‘information’ on which the strike was based was false, the result of a

clever deception by a group of disgruntled exiles eager to set the two nations at odds. Although in this case, unlike in the missionary example, the collective has employed lethal force, it is still not clear that it merits the label 'evil'. Certainly it should have checked the facts more carefully before it acted, and it probably deserves to be labelled 'imprudent', 'trigger-happy' or 'reckless'. But these are relatively mild terms of criticism in comparison with 'evil'. This government may at bottom be morally decent, if not always wise. That decency can be captured counterfactually: had it not been fed the false but credible intelligence about the other country's intentions, it would never have thought of launching the military strike. And when it learns of its mistake, it will apologise and make what amends it can.

It would be futile to try to draw a sharp dividing line between harm-causing collectives that are evil and those that are not. Evil comes in degrees, and intuitions vary about what counts as genuinely evil and what as merely very bad. I have suggested that the missionary order and the reckless government described above fall short of being evil. But should the same be said about the Spanish Inquisition, which burned, tormented, imprisoned and intimidated countless thousands of helpless individuals in its uncompromising defence of the Catholic faith? Like the missionary order, the Inquisition believed itself to be fulfilling a God-given duty to eliminate false belief and extirpate dissent; and like the government, it was prepared to harm large numbers of people for the sake of what it deemed a rightful end. One recent historian of the Inquisition remarks that one 'comes to suppose that it was only because inquisitors were so certain of the absolute justice of their cause that they were able to torture their prisoners with such a pitiless sense of purpose' (Green 2008: 84). The suppression of heresy seemed as eminently laudable an aim to the Inquisition as the promotion of tolerance and respect for difference appears to the modern liberal conscience. But to represent the Spanish Inquisition and the UK's Society for the Protection of Civil Liberties as similar groups of high-minded individuals intent on promoting their values ignores the fact that only one of them was prepared to employ murder, mayhem and terror as instruments of policy. As the same writer notes, 'In torturing their prisoners to further their ideals and vanquish their perceived enemies, they revealed their own lack of humanity' (Green 2008: 73). In contrast, the missionary order does not lack humanity; rather, it is motivated by a distorted sense of humanity which leads it to flout important values but not to attempt the advancement of humanity by destroying it. And while the government that orders the pre-emptive strike *does* destroy human life, it does so on the basis of a commonly

acknowledged right to take appropriate measures required for self-defence. Here it is not so much the moral thinking that is skewed as the factual beliefs that are calamitously wrong. To be sure, the Spanish Inquisition also laboured under false beliefs. But in its case these led not to a hastily conceived one-off aggressive action but a campaign of brutal persecution of hapless victims that lasted three centuries. While organisations such as the Spanish Inquisition and the Ku Klux Klan might operate with entire confidence in their own righteousness, that assurance itself testified to their moral confusion and loss of humane values.

Evil collectives not only do harm to those who are on the receiving end of their vicious acts: they can also significantly damage their own members. It is plainly bad to be a victim of violence from the Nazis or the KKK; but it is also bad to *be* a Nazi or a Klan member. In concluding this essay, I should like to say a little about the corrupting effects that evil collectives can have on their own membership.

Conglomerate collectives are composed of individuals who are co-participants in a common project or projects. To attain their ends, collectives need to form those individuals in their own image, or at least fit them to serve their purposes. Compulsion of the unwilling through the CID structures may sometimes be necessary too, but volunteers are normally better than pressed men. But this does not mean that collectives with morally monstrous purposes must create moral monsters to carry them out. An agent or member of a collective with evil intentions need not be a microcosm of the whole. A collective with evil purposes might conceivably operate with a staff who, by dint of careful information spin and a deft division of labour (so that no individual performs a role that is evidently wrong or harmful by itself), never ‘twig’ just what the organisation they serve is really up to – though such a Kafkaesque set-up is unlikely to be encountered very often. ⁸ More commonly a member or operative of an evil collective will be an unreflective, unimaginative person of limited or untapped sympathies who has been induced to follow the cause by indoctrination or peer-pressure. Even people with sound moral vision may find it hard to remain clear-sighted when brought to view reality through the distorting lens supplied by the collective. Several factors may contribute to this corrupting effect, of which I shall single out four.

The first and most obvious is that a member or agent of a collective enterprise is typically enmeshed in a web of ideas and influences that must inevitably impact on his or her own

thoughts, feelings and actions. This is true even where the collective refrains from employing the more overt forms of indoctrination or thought-control. If a collective pursues good ends, the practical effects of this influence should be benign (though there may be scope for concern at the diminution of individual autonomy). But where a collective that is bent on ill brings its agents to believe that bad is good and good is bad, then the harmful effect on their moral personality is profound and may be irreversible.

The second factor is closely related to the first. When internal influences are dominant, external ones will be weak. Messages from outside that are disfavoured by the collective may be explicitly suppressed and censored, or they may be more subtly denigrated by being portrayed as alien, heterodox, dangerous or irrelevant. Where members of an evil collective cannot be prevented from encountering conflicting views, they can be taught to treat them as emanating from fools, enemies or non-believers. This condition of mono-vision is liable to be intensified by the mutual reinforcement that members give to one another's views, in a collective bootstrapping operation. 9

The third way in which evil collectives corrupt their members is by demanding that they should be at all times loyal and obedient and abstain from criticism of the organisation or its leaders. Any conglomerate collective, to be able to function, must lay down entry conditions and rules of conduct and require them to be followed. But where an evil collective makes it a point of honour to obey without question and show unswerving loyalty, any member who has moral reservations about its policy or programme may feel *morally* obliged to set these aside and toe the line. Here the collective induces him to act badly through its parasitism on his moral integrity.

Fourth and lastly, an evil collective may deaden or lessen the moral sensibility of its members to its purposes by so distributing roles and tasks that each need only mind his or her own business and take no note of what others do. In this way, members with moral qualms are offered a tempting opportunity to focus on their own roles, innocent enough in isolation, and turn a blind eye to the larger picture. When individuals are fooled into believing that what they are doing is harmless, this is better described as exploitation than as corruption. Providing a person with an escape route from moral unease by fostering the practice of tunnel vision, on the other hand, is a guileful mode of moral corruption.

Even where members of evil collectives are far from saintly to begin with, their membership is liable to make them worse. Nagel remarks that some who join bad organisations positively enjoy the feeling of moral insulation that membership brings, where the idea that they are only following orders or doing their duty is heady and corrupting (Nagel 1978: 76). And that the wretchedness of their moral condition is invisible to the average Nazi or Klan member only serves to deepen it. Knowingly to inflict, or contribute to inflicting, serious unmerited harm on other sentient beings at the behest of some collective and *to think one is doing right* is to be in a sad state of moral darkness (albeit one may be in it more as the result of bad luck than of bad management, having been born or raised in the wrong time or place). By participating in the fulfilment of collective evil intentions, individuals unconsciously undermine the basis of their own self-respect as autonomous moral agents. Hence the degradation of their own members is not the least atrocious result for which evil collectives can be held morally responsible.

Notes.

1. There have, of course, been many attempts to define ‘evil’, and I do not pretend that my working definition captures all the elements that philosophers have identified in our concept – or perhaps more accurately, concepts – of evil. Paul Formosa notes that some accounts focus on evil as it affects victims, others on the motives or mentality of its perpetrators, others again on the characteristic impact it makes on bystanders (horror, disgust, incomprehension) (Formosa 2008: 220). I agree with Formosa that evil is a phenomenon with many aspects and that some combination of these approaches is needed to provide a comprehensive account of it (see Scarre 2010). I would, however, take issue with Formosa’s view that (an) evil will normally be a ‘life-ending or wrecking harm’ (Formosa 2008: 230). This is probably too strong (as is also the claim that evil is normally ‘intolerable’ or atrocious that forms a part of Claudia Card’s subtle and influential analysis of evil (see Card 2002); for there are many instances of evils on a lesser scale. Pursuing a perpetrator approach, Eve Garrard points out that it is sometimes the peculiar nastiness of an act rather than the amount of harm it causes that moves us to call it not merely ‘wrong’ but ‘evil’ (in Garrard 1998). Knocking the crutches out of the hands of a disabled elderly man would arguably qualify as evil on this conception, even

where its effects were no more than angry shock and some minor bruises. (This kind of nastiness, however, is probably not possible for collectives, if, as I shall argue in Section 3, collectives cannot be malevolent.) It is also worth adding that hunting animals purely for sport plausibly counts as evil under my working definition.

2. It is less clear that the epithet 'evil' should be applied to an individual or collective simply on the basis of his or its *intention* to bring about some vile end, in advance of any steps taken to fulfil it. For an intention may change before being acted upon; and it is only acts that show that intentions are serious and more than passing whims. But in the case of a collective which is formed to prosecute some bad purpose, the acts involved in its formation may be sufficient to render its bad intentions serious and warrant terming it 'evil' even before it has reached a condition of operational efficacy.
3. The parenthesis is inserted in recognition of the fact that in recent years football in Britain has often been run more as a business than a sport. Where this happens, a football club becomes a different (and, in the eyes of most fans, less satisfactory) kind of collective. In the present discussion, I shall ignore this regrettable declension from the ideal of sport for sport's sake.
4. Besides the disposition to take pleasure in others' pain, malevolence may also be held to involve a disposition to *cause* pain to others for the sake of the pleasure to be gained from it. But while a collective may intend to cause pain to others, it cannot intend to do this for the sake of the pleasure it will gain from it, for the reason given in the text.
5. Not all many-person collectives will display the three features of SCA in such a neat and tidy form; a collective such as a national government, for instance, may contain dissentient voices and be an imperfectly-cooperating structure, forced to rely on compromise where consensus is unattainable. Preventing such collectives from falling apart or collapsing into impotence will require their possession of robust CID structures capable of controlling, or in the worst case expelling, their non-cooperative members.
6. To have an intention to bring about X plausibly presupposes holding certain beliefs: minimally, that X is an achievable end and that doing Y is a suitable means for achieving X. Hence to assert that collectives can have intentions implies that they can be assigned beliefs as well, and some may complain that once this is granted we are well on the way to ascribing minds to them. However, there is no good reason to think that the ascription

of non-reducible collective intentions requires the ascription of *non-reducible* collective beliefs. That is to say, the collective beliefs associated with a collective intention may be assumed to be susceptible to a methodological individualist analysis which construes them as the beliefs of their members (or some relevant subset of them). This position is a consistent one, because while certain intentions are, as explained in Section 4, impossible or inappropriate for individuals, there is no bar to individuals holding the relevant supportive beliefs. For instance, only a collective can intend to go to war, but its leaders or generals can individually be assigned the beliefs that there is a legitimate ground for war or a viable mode of attack.

7. Of course, a collective intent on pursuing certain vile purposes could also have some innocent, even laudable, collective intentions, for instance that of looking after its elderly or sick members. But where there is a preponderance of bad aims, and particularly where those bad aims provide its *raison d'être*, the possession of some more innocent ones may do little to redeem its moral character and it may still said to be 'evil, on the whole'. Harder to categorise is a collective which has a mixed programme of good and bad objectives (e.g. a political party which when in power organises social improvement programmes for one sector of the population but treats another sector with harshness). Here the simplest option is to acknowledge that the collective is both good in some respects and evil in others. Combinations of good and bad intentions (often associated with greater or less moral confusion) are not uncommon, in either individuals or collectives.
8. A still more Kafkaesque scenario can be imagined. An evil genius sets up an organisation to promote his wicked ends, carefully allocating roles in such a way that none but he is aware of the serious unmerited harm that it does. Eventually the *fons et origo mali* dies, leaving his organisation in perfect functioning order. This is now an evil collective composed of members each of whom is morally innocent, because ignorant, of the dreadful effects they jointly cause. While this scenario is empirically unlikely, it nevertheless shows that it is *logically* possible to have an evil collective that comprises no evil members.
9. The same dynamic may, of course, also operate in a virtuous collective, to much better effect – albeit at some risk to the freedom of thought.

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